

AUDIO

FAQ

Q I bought an FM transmitter for playing my MP3 player wirelessly through my car radio. I was told it is illegal to use it, but then I read that it isn't. What's going on?

A Ofcom, which regulates UK radio broadcasts, can't prevent the sale of radio equipment that complies with European Union rules. The sale of many broadcast devices is legal, but anyone actually broadcasting in the FM frequency spectrum needs an Ofcom licence. Until very recently, using even a legally bought FM transmitter with your MP3 player was illegal, but after a period of public consultation, Ofcom has just relaxed the rules.

Since 8th December 2006 it has been legal to use a low-power FM transmitter with an MP3 player. It's important to note, however, that the regulations legalise only the use of transmitters bearing the CE mark, and you'll still be breaking the law if your transmitter doesn't have one of these.

Ben Pitt

Music and photography expert

ben@computershopper.co.uk

M-AUDIO Black Box Reloaded

★★★★

£89 inc VAT

This is one of very few PC audio interfaces designed for guitarists. It combines a guitar effects box, a basic drum machine, a USB sound card and Ableton Live Lite 4 GTR software for recording your music.

The hardware is superbly thought out, with a high-impedance guitar input and a headphone output at the front. At the back, the main stereo output is via guitarist-friendly quarter-inch jack sockets, and there's an XLR microphone input, a coaxial S/PDIF output and three sockets for connecting foot pedals to control the effects. It's a shame that the microphone input doesn't have phantom power for condenser microphones, though, and that there's no power switch. The front panel has dedicated knobs for input and output levels and four more to adjust whatever settings are displayed on the screen. The controls are very straightforward, but there are various extra options that require you to press a button twice to access them.

The built-in effects work regardless of whether the unit is attached to a computer. They include guitar amp simulation with a choice of 40 models named after classic amp designs. There's a wide variety of tones on offer but, sadly, there's no escaping the brittle, synthetic bite that digital distortion effects often produce. The FX section includes various tremolos, choruses and flangers. It offers a wide range of rhythmic filters and gated effects that score highly for originality and downright weirdness, but they didn't sweep us away. Basic delay and reverb complete the effects chain.



The rhythmic effects can be locked to the tempo of the built-in drum machine, or you can synchronise them to the tempo of your audio software. This proved tricky in practice, though, and the software control panel required us to unplug and reconnect the device regularly in order to adjust settings. The drum sounds and patterns are good enough only for private practice. Otherwise, the unit worked well as a sound card, with decent audio quality and reliable performance using MME and ASIO drivers.

The built-in effects are disappointing, but this is still a well-priced audio interface, especially when you consider that it includes the excellent Ableton software. You can upgrade to the full version of Ableton Live 6 for €349 (around £237). This software alone usually costs around £330, so if you intend to buy it anyway, in effect you can get the Black Box Reloaded for free.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Useful blend of features and software
- ✓ Good value
- ✗ Guitar effects are disappointing

AUDIO INTERFACE XLR and ¼" phono input, line, headphone and S/PDIF outputs, 24-bit, 44.1kHz sample rate, USB interface
SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk
DETAILS www.maudio.co.uk

Also consider...

PHILIPS SLA5520

★★★★★

£78 inc VAT

PHILIPS Philips' SLA5520 takes music from your PC via a wireless network and plays it on your hi-fi. It comes with Philips' own server program, but you can also use it with Windows Media Connect.

The SLA5520 is quite basic, but it's a great buy if you want an easy way to play your music wirelessly.



WIRELESS NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER Supports MP3, WAV, WMA, WMA-DRM, 802.11g interface, WEP or WPA encryption, 3.5mm socket audio output. REQUIRES Windows 2000/XP SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com> DETAILS www.philips.com ✓ Good value ✗ Screen hard to read FULL REVIEW Jul 2006

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£26 inc VAT

LOGITECH Logitech's X-230 were the most affordable 2.1 channel speakers in our recent Labs test, but they sounded better than much more expensive competitors. Each satellite's drivers are visible through a cloth net covering, while the compact subwoofer is protected by a sturdy metal grille.

These speakers could do with a second audio input, longer cables and an easy to reach bass level control, but they're outstanding for this price. Though not amazingly loud, they look superb and produce detailed and balanced sound.

2.1 SPEAKERS Line input, 32W RMS power PART CODE 970123-0120 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk ✓ Excellent sound ✗ Only one input FULL REVIEW Apr 2006



LOGITECH Z-5450

★★★★★

£199 inc VAT

LOGITECH Logitech's Z-5450 5.1 surround-sound speakers transmit sounds to the rear set wirelessly, so you'll have less clutter in your living room. Sound quality is excellent and the speakers are loud.

With loads of inputs and a decoder, these speakers are perfect for your PC or DVD player.



5.1 SPEAKERS Three line inputs, one coaxial and two optical digital inputs, 315W RMS power PART CODE 970191-0120 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk ✓ Sound great; loads of features ✗ Expensive FULL REVIEW Dec 2006

LOGITECH Z-10 Interactive Speaker System

★★★★

£82 inc VAT



These stylish speakers connect to a PC via USB, and a built-in screen can display track information, time and date, processor and RAM usage and a stopwatch. The USB connection carries both data and the audio signal, bypassing the sound card and any features it offers. There's also a standard analogue input for an MP3 player. Touch-sensitive play/pause and track skip buttons worked fine in Windows Media Player, but they stopped working with iTunes when another Windows application had focus.

Sound is clear and detailed, but has a slightly aggressive tone. The lack of a subwoofer helps to produce a focused sound, but bass is understated. Overall, sound quality is different from – but not obviously better than – that of Logitech's X-230 set; see our 'Also consider...' below. You pay a lot for the screen and controls, but if you haven't room for a subwoofer they're a decent choice.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Decent sound
- ✓ Attractive styling
- ✗ Screen and controls up the price

2.0 SPEAKERS USB and line input, 30W RMS power
PART CODE 970243-0120
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.logitech.com

SAMSON CO1U

★★★★

£60 inc VAT



Most microphones aimed at musicians won't plug into a standard sound card. Samson's CO1U gets around the problem by plugging into a USB port. It works with Windows XP's built-in drivers. You can use the Windows mixer as a basic volume control, but you're better off downloading Samson's SoftPre applet, which provides more advanced settings and Windows Driver Model (WDM) drivers.

Build quality is excellent and the microphone looks and feels like a proper recording tool. Its sound quality is also superb and has a warm tone.

Despite the simplicity of the USB connection, this microphone can be tricky to use, as you'll need to configure your music-production software to use the microphone for recording and your usual sound card for playback. This rules out the use of ASIO drivers and caused a synchronisation problem where there was a short delay between audio input and output. It also means you can't monitor your vocals through headphones as you're performing. However, for podcasters, the CO1U is ideal.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent sound quality
- ✓ Attractive design
- ✗ Configuration can be tricky

USB MICROPHONE 16-bit, 48kHz sample rate, requires Windows XP SP2
SUPPLIER www.dv247.com
DETAILS www.samsontech.com

CHOOSING A... Sound Card

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

INPUTS: Mic, line

OUTPUTS: Three line (5.1 surround)

CONVERTER SPECIFICATION: 16-bit, 44.1kHz

3D SUPPORT: DirectSound 3D

INTERFACE: PCI

Recommended minimum in grey

1 A sound card with the specifications shown above can cost as little as £10, but it's unlikely to perform any better than a typical motherboard's onboard sound and may not come with any useful software.

2 DVD enthusiasts will need a Dolby Digital decoder for surround-sound DVD audio. This is built into most DVD playback software, so a 5.1 output sound card will suffice. PowerDVD and WinDVD software comes in two-channel and six-channel versions. Make sure you have the six-channel version for surround playback.

If you want to connect to a home cinema amplifier, look for a card with either optical or co-axial S/PDIF outputs.

3 Games enthusiasts will appreciate surround sound, but support for 3D standards adds further excitement. DirectSound 3D allows sounds to pan around the speakers; Sensaura and Aureal technologies make the effect even more convincing. EAX simulates the acoustics of games environments. EAX Advanced HD enhances the capabilities of EAX in compatible games.

4 Those serious about audio fidelity require high-quality digital-to-analogue and analogue-to-digital converters (DACs and ADCs). Most PC audio runs at 16-bit, 44.1kHz, but higher-specified DACs and ADCs running at 24-bit, 96kHz perform better. Creative's Audigy 2 cards play DVD Audio discs, including a stereo 192kHz recording and a surround 24/96 recording.

5 For music production, get a card with all the analogue and digital connections to wire up the rest of your studio gear, plus ASIO drivers for better performance in compatible software.

6 PCI is the standard interface for sound cards, although some add an external or drive bay-mounted expansion box for extra sockets. USB devices are also available to meet most needs.

LOGITECH AudioStation

★★★★★

£134 inc VAT



Logitech's AudioStation is a mid-range iPod speaker dock, but it sounds better than many that cost more. It's the only dock we've tested with an FM tuner, a sensible addition given that no iPod has its own. Although you can't synchronise a docked iPod with your computer, the AudioStation is great value, and the first iPod dock to deserve our Best Buy award.



IPOD DOCK STEREO SPEAKERS iPod dock connector and 3.5mm stereo line input, composite and S-video outputs, FM radio, 80W RMS power PART CODE 970217-0120 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk ✓ Clear, loud sound ✗ No iPod PC connector FULL REVIEW Jan 2007

SANDISK Sansa e260

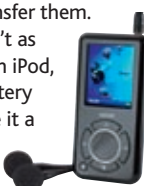
★★★★★

£99 inc VAT



Though it looks like the old iPod Nano, SanDisk's Sansa e260 costs less than Apple's 4GB equivalent. Unlike the Nano, it can play back video files on its colour screen; its software makes it easy to convert and transfer them.

The e260 isn't as easy to use as an iPod, but its good battery and sound make it a great choice at this price.



FLASH MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA and WMA-DRM music, JPEG and bitmap picture files and MOV video files, USB Hi-Speed interface PART CODE SDMX4-4096-E70 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.sandisk.co.uk ✓ Good-value iPod Nano alternative ✗ Annoying controls FULL REVIEW Sep 2006

M-AUDIO Podcast Factory

★★★★★

£77 inc VAT



If you want to record your own podcasts, M-Audio's Podcast Factory has everything you need. The condenser microphone has an XLR connector, a desktop stand and a specialised audio interface that connects to your PC through USB.

With its library of music loops, Audacity and the Podifier upload software, this is a great bundle of audio equipment.

PODCAST HARDWARE CONDENSER MICROPHONE XLR, 1/4" phono input, RCA and headphone outputs. Software requires Windows XP, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.m-audio.co.uk ✓ Good-quality hardware ✗ Poor manual FULL REVIEW Nov 2006